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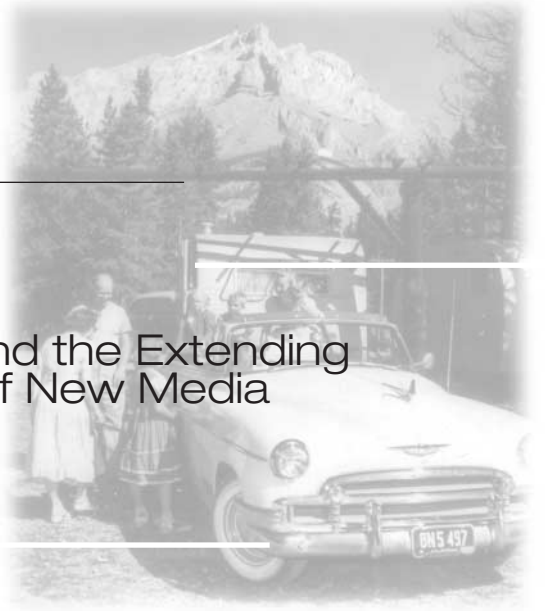
Living With the Dead



Sharkfeed and the Extending Ontologies of New Media

John Grech

This article examines how new media are helping to actualise new forms of "being" and "knowing" by mixing realities of the virtual and the real. The blending of archival and contemporary material in a Web installation called Sharkfeed *provides a context for this discussion. Themes such as death, memory, past and present, and mind and body provide the critical fissures through which to move beyond older theoretical paradigms and examine the emerging possibilities of the social particularities and cultural practices engendered in the interconnected time spaces of a digital era.*

This article explores death in relation to new media in an effort to consider what it means to live in a digital age, a world of structures, networks, and communities made out of real as well as virtual spaces. In exploring this world, I will refer to a Web site called *Sharkfeed*, a project I was invited to do by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) in 1997 and that was completed by Wobbegong Productions[1] in conjunction with the Australian Film Commission and launched on ABC On-Line in July 2000.

Claude Lefort commenced the "Forward" to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968) by recounting the story of the unexpected and premature death of the author. It is somewhat ironic, then, that what is arguably Merleau-Ponty's most challenging work was to be published posthumously as an edited compendium of unfinished notes, sketches, and thoughts by his friend. That being the case, one of the greatest problems in editing the book, as Lefort admitted, was how to deal with the traces of Merleau-Ponty's invisible hand. Lefort finally resolved this by leaving it to the

Author's Note: The URL for this project is http://www.abc.net.au/sharkfeed.

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reader to complete the text. There is no greater irony in this book, therefore, than the fact that Merleau-Ponty, who was centrally concerned with notions of invisibility and disappearance, became invisible himself.

Death is a terribly final act! There is nothing after it, no encore, no final round of applause or critical praise. No final expression of love or appreciation can follow the dead into the grave. The disappearance of an author, an originator, a creator, as living being, seems to be an ultimate, insurmountable form of "other"-ing that dwarfs all other differences we experience as moderns. We, the living, can never know what the dead know until we know death ourselves. But once dead, we cannot communicate what we know back to the living. Nor can we return to complete a great unfinished work. Or so it seems! Yet if we could understand death, would we not begin to understand what it means to be inseparably part of the world at the same time as being permanently separated from it? Is death not a continuum of life?

Haunting Virtual Space

> There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence. . . . Haunted places are the only ones people can live in.
>
> —Michel de Certeau (*The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1988, p. 108)

Sharkfeed is about the kidnapping and death in 1960 of a young schoolboy named Graeme Thorne who lived in the Sydney beachside suburb of Bondi. The site brings together captured film stills from ABC's television archives, photographs of Sydney made during the 1980s and 1990s, newspaper reports, narrative accounts, along with analytic and interpretive texts compiled by the cowriters, Matthew Leonard and myself. In addition, Matthew provided the original sound design for the project, whereas I provided the artistic direction and contemporary images. The project thus combines contemporary and archival material (written, aural, and visual) to produce a virtual environment where some of the myths and memories haunting the lived spaces of Sydney today come alive.

Sharkfeed explores how the death of a young boy led to the creation of a whole new universe, a side-real world that, on one hand, is barred from the living, but that, on the other, continues to coexist with the living. For although the death of Graeme Thorne is an undeniable tragedy to those closely connected to him, in dying, Graeme entered into the cultural imaginary of the Australian psyche. Thus, instead of becoming a typical Sydney-sider leading what would probably have been a comfortable but perhaps mundane life, Thorne continues to exist today as an extraordinary figure in an imaginary nation Peter Peirce (1999) saw fit to name *The Country of the Lost Children*. That land is today full of wandering children, missing children, as well as other lost people, whose actual physical fate has never impeded the fantastic roles they are asked to play in the community's dreaming space. Through these fantasy plays are woven the narratives, myths, and tales that community wishes to tell itself, about itself, and for itself. Echoed in many parts of the Western world, the Graeme Thorne myth is rich with stories of "stranger danger"; the fear of the other; the desire for money; the pursuit of progress; faith in technology, science, and reason; and the myth of childhood. These are some of the imaginary realms *Sharkfeed* conjures up.

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If *Sharkfeed* were made up of only archival material though, it would have remained encapsulated as a mythical imaginary—a social history. With the generation of contemporary material, these imaginary realms are situated back into the concrete present, the *real*. This brings it back to life as a hybrid reality that I want to explore further. But first, let me indicate some methodological parameters in the project.

The Artistic Directions in *Sharkfeed*

There are two theoretical elements that underpin *Sharkfeed*. One is the notion of documentary—the use of material evidence like photographs, historical accounts, and eyewitness reports to assemble authoritative, truthful narratives about real events. In "The Domain of Documentary," Bill Nichols (1991) showed how documentaries have assembled an array of languages to do this. Yet one thing remains clear—documentaries use material objects to testify and verify the truth. The *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (Bullock, Stallybrass, & Trombley, 1988) spoke of "materialism" as a theory in which there must be some form of material trace or object (testified to by it being seen or touched) to verify that event or thing really exists. Truth is then asserted in narratives and other linguistic descriptions derived from such objects.

Yet *Sharkfeed* undermines its own basic premise about documentary and particularly the faith in material objects. For years, we have known that photographs presented as evidence can be readily manipulated by the judicious use of captions, narratives, as well as the selective use of other objects and images. This is further complicated by digital technologies capacity to forge and fake things. New media blow away whatever credibility photography had to represent events as they really were. Yet still, *Sharkfeed* trades on ideas of the representation of truth by presenting things like photographs as evidence.

One way to overcome the problem is to abandon the idea that reality is an objective, material phenomenon that may be represented by objects such as photographs, which are then used to support particular narratives about reality. This is not to say that things are not real, however, or that we are reduced to telling relativist stories in which one point of view is cancelled out by any other. We know that Graeme Thorne really existed and that he really died as a consequence of his kidnapper's actions. But that is not the same as saying that the kidnapper intended to kill Thorne. Causality of events, when asserted through material objects alone, does not automatically indicate intention or meaning.

The second element underpinning *Sharkfeed* is *rephotography*, a term I borrow from a project realised by Klett, Manchester, and Verburg in 1984. Rephotography is a deliberate repetition of a photographic act to learn more about a specific event in real time and space represented by the act. Edmund Husserl once argued that a historical moment is a "fact" (*en fait* or *unicite*, as Derrida translated it) and that such a moment, as an experience, is unique. Rephotography recites Derrida's critique of Husserl's phenomenology and is a methodology that harbours at its core an idea that "the nonrepeatable fact must have in principle brought into history what can be wilfully and indefinitely repeated" (Derrida, cited by Lawler, 2001). If we accept Derrida's proposition, rephotography, as a technique, may be seen as a way to create a paradoxical situation whereby a wilfully repeated act becomes a way of (re)apprehending a unique historical moment over and again.

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As stated above, *Sharkfeed* was not conceived to tell the absolute, authoritative version of the real or unique story surrounding Graeme Thorne's kidnap. What it sets out to do is to gain greater insight into the event and how the kidnap influenced and continues to reflect Australian society.

Turning again to the *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (Bullock et al., 1988, pp. 406-407, 724, 824, 825), we learn that conventional psychoanalytic theory (such as that developed around screen theory) suggests that, as spectators, we identify with the *subject* through our sense of an *imaginary* (self) situated in the *symbolic* (culture or society). But the sense of identification with our imaginary subject is lost when the *actual* impinges and disrupts our expectations of what the *real* ought to be. Looked at in this way, Thorne's kidnapping disturbs us when we see how things can turn so quickly from a dreamed-of lottery win in June 1960 to the dreadful realisation that the tragic loss of a young child's life weeks later was a direct result of that win. In psychoanalytic terms, this leads to a loss of control in the face of an unknown other who threatens the subject's stability and sense of reality. At an immediate, material level, Graeme Thorne's death does exactly that.

Sharkfeed offers other ways of identifying (with) the subject, however. Suggested by his virtual presence, Graeme Thorne may be considered to be still present today, at least at the edges of our cultural fears and imaginings, making us realise that we (too) are captives in (our) time that now coexists with the envelope of Graeme's life. Henri Bergson's philosophy of time, space, and virtual coexistence is useful in understanding what might be happening here (see Deleuze, 1991).

Consequently, it might be argued that who has really been lost in Graeme Thorne's kidnap is Istvan Baranyay, the man transformed from a (Jewish-Hungarian) World War II survivor who migrated to Australia in March 1950 to become a shady, corrupted figure named Stephen Lesley Bradley, Thorne's kidnapper. Strictly speaking, Bradley is a man whose place in history can never be redeemed. But the same may not be true of Istvan Baranyay. Yet still, (Baranyay) Bradley also lives on, forever captive in his cell of time.

Does this "relativisation" cheapen, lessen, or reduce the reality of Thorne's or Bradley's lives, not to mention all the others who were sucked into the vortex of events that wintry June day? Not really! Not if they are remembered for who they really were. But *Sharkfeed* rejected the voice of absolute authority to link its narrative of observable, material objects and events with *the real*. How can I now claim to *really* talk about those people? This is where rephotography comes in.

Rephotographing an event is like tracing out the footsteps of one's progenitors and forces us to recall that they, like us, existed in a spatio-cultural network, an envelope of social time, which actualised their extraordinary, if sometimes tragic, lives. Now, we might remember that our lives are also surrounded by a large blanket, a big sleep as Shakespeare put it, an oblivion of matrices and spatio-temporal coordinates that cradles (our) existence.

Thus, remembering who those people really were means remembering who we really are as well. Stripped bare of our fear of them as our unknown other, we can now remember them because we recognise that they are also us, or could have been anyway, anywhere, anytime. If we can agree on this, then we can agree that although material causality does not automatically indicate intention or meaning, this does not mean that intention and meaning are absent either. We can imagine others' intentions and the meaning of their actions by imagining ourselves in their time-space locations.

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Mixing Realities: New and Old Media

Sharkfeed could have been realised in the older medium of photography as I had already done with *The Holtermann Rephotographs* (Grech, 1989, 2000). Yet there are aspects of such a work—and the idea of living in hybrid realities—that are accentuated and better realised through new technology. New media help dissolve distinctions between memory and matter, imaginary and real, self and other and (re)turn memory and imaginary into matter, past and future into present, mind and spirit into body. Thus, things that once seemed mutually exclusive, polarised, and opposed, or things that once appeared to cancel each other, are resituated in a state of expectant suspension. Together, such old binary warhorses become the animating cohabitors of a new ontological state accommodating the social particularities and cultural practices engendered by the time spaces in a digital era. Here, past and present are actualised together as alternate futures in a way people have long dreamt about doing but have been unable to materially achieve—until quite recently. In doing so, the nature of mind and body have changed. How new media, which is still in its infancy, is achieving this is yet to be fully understood.

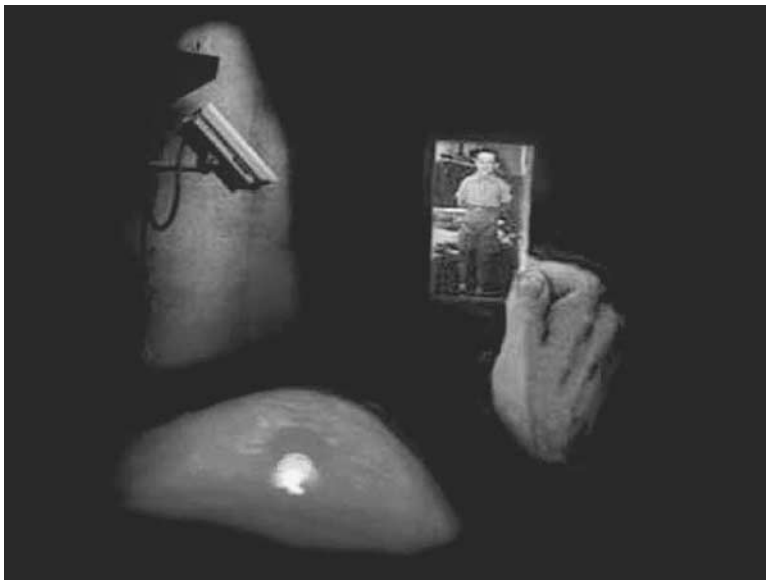

Figure 1. The eye, the camera, and the hand combined in searching the metropolis for Graeme Thorne in *Sharkfeed*. Photographic fragments by John Grech (1990). Archival footage Australian Broadcasting Corporation (1960).

Sharkfeed combines visual and other material to actualise an imaginary past suspended with/in a knowing present by

1. mixing material from different eras, genres, levels, and modalities (e.g., documentary television footage with art photography, social history with contemporary speculation and invention, science and technology with popular folklore, and newspaper clippings with official records);
2. mixing a number of discursive strategies (narrative, descriptive, evocative, and interpretive); and
3. mixing media (images, writing, sound).

As predictable as these strategies may seem, sometimes the most obvious move is exactly what is needed for the predisposition in contemporary Western culture to

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measure and oppose notions of past and present, self and other, here and there, reality and fantasy. The thought that Graeme Thorne and Stephen Lesley Bradley do not coexist with/in us now is one example of how binary thinking still dominates our culture.

New media in general, and projects like *Sharkfeed* in particular, destabilise conceptions of past and present by using materials and techniques (photography, documentary, evidence) that normally confirm the logics of binary conventions and then playfully suspend (dis)belief at the (im)possibility of these constructions. This subverts, or at least challenges, attempts to explain the world through materialist science and rationalism alone based on assuming that only what is quantified and measured materially has the power to "explain" why things are the way they are. That tradition of binary thinking discredits other, sometimes fantastic, accounts of how things might really be.

The binary opposition of past and present, documentary record, and fictional text points to the fundamental distinction between illusion and reality that Plato was at pains to point out in his Simile of the Cave. Aristotle complimented this idea by adding that the foundational mean (the golden mean) of a rational philosophy of nature (see also Koestler, 1968) is a science measured by the (human) body. As Kenneth Clark (1990) put it, by the time of the Renaissance, "man [became] the measure of all things" (pp. 89-116). Yet if scientific reality is ideally measured by and through the body, since the Renaissance, Western culture has devised ever more elaborate technologies that complement and extend the capabilities of the body.

Beyond the Binary

> In the secret agreement between past and present the body of history, the history of the body . . . history as body, breaks into the past in order to re-configure and em-body the present in an ontological interruption.
>
> —Iain Chambers "Maps, Movies, Musics, and Memory," 1997, p. 236)

Today, it is Plato's cave that is looking more like an illusion, the foundation of a (false) epistemology that denies a contiguous ontology by asserting that there is a fundamental dichotomy between illusion and reality, matter and imaginary, mind and body. To the Aboriginal spirit alive in Claude Levi-Strauss's (1979) mind, the separation between material reality (truth) and imaginary myth (illusion) is nothing but bad voodoo, a self-deluding promulgation that leads Western thinkers to exercise power over matter through science and technology based on a half-hearted (i.e., mental) understanding of what matter actually is. This form of binary thinking is a way of alienating and excluding the self from the other.

Lawrence Grossberg (1996) has argued that the process of other-ing is actually one of the fundamental "logics of modernity." For Grossberg, other-ing is about making distinctions with/in objects and events that fragment identifications over time and space. Modernity, according to Grossberg, "never constitutes itself as an identity (different from others) but as a difference" (p. 93). Grossberg concluded that modernity thus makes the self experience itself as being different—from itself—across time and space. This binary-isation of self as other is possible through modern technologies: Temporal technologies such as clocks, photography, and cinema realise the passage of

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time, making distinctions between who and what we are "now" in relation to who and what we were "then"; spatial technologies such as trains, cars, and planes realise movement and space and highlight differences of "being here" and "being there."

If other-ing is one facet of alienation, and alienation one facet of modernity, this helps explain the intense interest in nomadology, migration, exile, and mobility as modern thinkers try to understand the impact of modernisation. And, if the engine of modernity is capitalism (the grand economic theory that envelopes the world today) and the technologies (modes of production) it engenders, isn't new media complicit in further alienating us? I will return to the question of alienation later, but for the moment I want to consider some possible theoretical moves to answer this question.

Extending the Body—Expanding the Screen

One way is to argue that new media, as a means of instantaneous communication through time space, allow us to "be" in several places at once. This could lead to a romantic conclusion that new media actualise a "holisitic" ontology represented by an "indigenous" capacity to "be" simultaneously here and there, in myth and science, spirit and matter, mind and body, past and present. Following this line of thought, new media can be seen not to alienate us but rather engender new continuities between mind, body, and soul.

There may be other ways of approaching this question that take us beyond the body, though. These seek to conceptualise new paradigms for a nonembodied (that is, neither disembodied yet not embodied or reembodied either) theorisation of the realities engendered by new media. Such realities signal a transition from the experience of being in front of the screen to being with the screen—what Thomas Elsaesser dubbed as the "different modalities created by the mobility of the cinematic apparatus."[2] Elsaesser's comment suggested to me that the spectator's experience, once dependent on be(com)ing totally disembodied (becoming mind) in a timeless nowhereness inside a cinema, has transmigrated with new media. This transmigration has generated new modes of extended (dis)embodied being.

To avoid confusion, I will distinguish my use of the term *(dis)embodied* from film theorists such as Torben Grodal's (1997, 2000) use of it. Historically, the experience of watching a film in a cinema allowed the spectator to leave his or her (troubled) world behind. (This is why going to the movies became popular during the Great Depression.) Yet leaving that world behind necessitated leaving the body there too. Film theorists' notion of the disembodied certainly helps explain the importance of comfortable seating, soundproofing, and the exclusion of sun and other light sources from movie theatres, all in the name of facilitating the spectators' total entry (immersion) into the make-believe world of the screen.

Translocated into bedroom, study, workplace, classroom, becoming immersed in the screen is no longer dependent on the viewers' total denial of (their) bodily experience (as disembodied spectators). Instead, there is now a fusion of sensual information, partly derived from technology (image, text, sound) and partly from the physical location of the body (what the spectator hears, sees, smells, tastes, touches, and feels). This new experience is "being" engendered as new media extends the body by expanding the screen. Imagine walking along the street with a Walkman on, and suddenly, the experience of the street combines with the music so that the whole situation

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takes on the appearance of a cinematic experience. This is one sort of an expanded screen experience, yet as Chambers (1990) pointed out, it still remains "above all, an intensely private experience" (p. 1).

Where once mediated experiences such as cinema depended on locking out the rest of the world, the reengagement of the body's senses by new technology becomes another element in an existential plane where an extended ontological experience is neither purely biological (derived solely from the senses of the body) nor purely technological (derived from the computer or the Walkman). This new sense of being depends on the in(ter)vention of a technological device that displaces sensory data or information, which then creates an ontological fusion between body and technology. This fusion may be characterised as comprising

1. primary sensory data derived *from* the concrete physicality of our embodiment and
2. secondary (analogue) and tertiary (digital) data derived *through* the body's senses but originating in technologies that displace information as well as creating new virtual environments (read also *representation* or *simulacra*).[3]

The implications of these ontological shifts and the epistemological paradigms they engender are enormous. But does this mean that we finally are able to accommodate the invisible, ghostly worlds around us? Can these worlds remain or return to the confined, mutually exclusive domains of real and imaginary, present and absent, then and now? Conjoined together through new media, can these hitherto mutually exclusive realms dissolve distinctions between mind and body, self and other? How are these changes affecting our sense of reality, identity, and community?

Such questions are not new in themselves, but they are highlighted by new technology, and just posing them challenges the foundations of how we continue to relate to (know) each other. What is even more disturbing is that, with the promise of an ongoing process of modernisation, technological innovation, and development, such questions reveal that we will never be able to bed down with a single epistemological paradigm again. The theorisation of new media may founder, therefore, in its own childhood, as future technologies swamp the present and shake the ground under its emergent discourse. Ours truly is a present that is flooded by future as well as past possibilities.

Sounding the Body

There is another side of this story that is disquieting though, for let us not forget that Graeme Thorne was a real living boy—a finite human body. There is a danger, in all this speculation, that we might yet forget that, as bodies, we still exist in real time and real space. Can the fusion of body sensation with technological s(t)imulation lead to the (re)creation of a cyber monster, an ever-mutating body (knowledge/being) that is constantly undergoing (technological) expansion to return it to the world unscathed? Or will the vanity of the living try to preserve the body at an imaginary peak, even if it means dispensing with more and more of what remains of this body (memory) as it gets older? Putting it another way, what does it do to our sense of reality to see (or to imagine) Graeme Thorne alive on a Bondi street in 1997?

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Figure 2. Graeme Thorne walking the streets of Sydney again!? Photograph by John Grech (1997). Archival footage Australian Broadcasting Corporation (1960).

Reconsidering sound may be helpful in dealing with this problem, not as a new metaphor to articulate older rationalisations but as another way to remember the body. Here, it might be suggested, *Sharkfeed* may be a little underplayed. For although sound may indeed help to move the spectator's eye across the screen, its erratic deployment in this project means that it only occasionally breaks into the visual and written diegesis of the work. In part, this was a problem with producing sound on the Web—the present limitations of sound software, code, and Internet delivery, not to mention the unknown users' capacity at the other end, made it impossible for any but a rudimentary use of sound. This was further complicated by requirements from ABC (a public broadcaster) that the site remain accessible to those with slower Internet connections and older computers and software. Yet the failure to accommodate that extra something that sound might have contributed to *Sharkfeed* and what that might have achieved does not mean that it is not possible to consider or envisage where sound might have taken it.

That extra something is what Chambers (1997) has termed the excess capacity of sound to interrupt a sutured past invented by a rational, ordered vision of it by and in the present. For Chambers, sound can act like an unexpected comma or full stop, making him aware of the artificiality of the rational constructions of vision as a primary apparatus for a mental-rational world. If, in Western culture, vision is as dominant as people claim, then sound may usefully disrupt this imag(in)ed field. Sound may unseat a calm, controlling eye by acting like a stalker coming at it from the side, leaving it desperately sweating under its own spot light, caught in the prison of its own frame. With hindsight, might it not be better said that, in spite of itself, this is precisely what the erratic, unpredictable placement of the sound in *Sharkfeed* does? Now we may get really excited, as the sound opens up the screen to ways of looking, seeing, knowing not previously considered.

Yet we are confronted by another problem! Sound can also suture a discomforting textual vista by taming a unsympathetic editorial cut, an unexpected visual clue, or a jarring narrative jump that seems to lead nowhere. Sound itself is not devoid of (its) forms of rationality. This brings us back to some basic questions: What is the objective of making such a work? Is it to represent life? Is it to present a machine as if it were alive? Or is this machine working to service life, to make life more viable by remembering a body that continues to live on within-without the machinic apparatus?

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Conclusion—Living With the Dead

I started this article by recounting some thoughts after reading Lefort's reflections on Merleau-Ponty's death. Death suggests silence, invisibility, emptiness, loss—words that arouse great interest and emotion. But does that mean that life and death become a string of words (signs)? The death of Merleau-Ponty brought a sense of silence, emptiness, loss, and invisibility to Claude Lefort, but now that Merleau-Ponty's words are the only signs I have, has he become just a set of signs in my mind? What do such signs take and make in me? An imaginary Merleau-Ponty? A sense of "being" in time and space that no longer is? Yes, but also a time and space that never really existed before I imagined it, just like these words make spaces where you and I may imagine each other where once we could not. Yet beyond this, in the shadow of these words are the empty *actual* spaces that you and I constantly reoccupy in living out our lives. Is this the case for Merleau-Ponty?

New technology may overcome such binaries by merging the virtual and the real. For example, spectacular digital effects have allowed directors to complete films even after their starring actors have died. New media also enable people to communicate over great distances instantaneously, perhaps even through the veil of death. Yet people criticise technology for alienating us from ourselves, from who and what we are. But what if alienation is not really a condition derived from technology or modernity? What if alienation is one of life's contradictions and is, therefore, ontological, "holding us prisoner in the time of our 'being'?" as Chambers (1997, p. 236) argued? If alienation is indeed ontological, this means it may not be just the outcome of bad binary oppositions. Some things like death and life are actually antithetical yet also inseparably connected, a continuum that moves us gradually from beings in identical singularities into states of actual difference. The state of being (dead or alive) is thus more than just a binary operation, more than just a string of words and signs. Alienation is not just a result of modern technology or the way we think (language) we know (epistemology) the world but is seated in our state of being (ontology).

Chambers (1994, pp. 117-118) elsewhere argued that performing "ourselves" transforms us into actors, authors, and creators. From this position, may we not now begin to conclude, heretofore, that Graeme Thorne and Stephen Lesley Bradley may have really been just bad actors, sad performers who actualised only the tragic possibilities presented by the architectures of their lives, their envelopes of space time?

Returning to the future, the writer of this script in writing, the "I" also finds itself "being" rewritten, as we (reader and writer) struggle to come to terms with what Graeme Thorne and Stephen Bradley, as well as Merleau-Ponty, left (us) behind. Mediating such possibilities, arguably what new media do best, allows us to perform not so much as binaries but rather as potentialities. But like all new positions, these must be realised by someone acting them out. In so doing, we will have to learn to live with the dead!

Notes

1. Wobbegong Productions is a company I established with Sarah Lambert, whom I introduced into the project in mid-1998 as designer and progammer to complete the production team.

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2. I wish to thank Thomas Elsaesser for clarifying these thoughts and especially in the discussion that arose with Gertrude Koch after a lecture titled "Cinema and Architecture," which she gave on May 4, 2001, at the University of Amsterdam.

3. I wish to thank Kate Sparke Richards for making the distinctions between primary, secondary, and tertiary information for me.

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